

Friday Focus:
Rigorous Standards Based Unit Design
Or
In Pursuit of Luxury

(Standard I, Indicator I-A-2)

Proficient: “Designs units of instruction with measurable outcomes and challenging tasks requiring higher-order thinking skills that enable students to learn the knowledge and skills defined in state standards/local curricula.”

Exemplary: “Designs *integrated* units of instruction with measurable, *accessible* outcomes and challenging tasks requiring higher-order thinking skills that enable students to learn *and apply* the knowledge and skills defined in state standards/local curricula. *Is able to model this element.*”

I’ve heard it said that designing curriculum isn’t for everyone. I disagree. Designing curriculum *could* be for everyone, if everyone had the time and resources to explore his or her passions and enough motivation to delve into the essential concepts and relevance to the human condition in the chosen area. Maybe I’m projecting, but I should think it would be downright *luxurious* to have the time, resources, and wherewithal to create such units of curriculum, and watch your idealized vision of instruction become encoded into something that has shape and substance and utility to others.

So therein lies the difficulty. Plenty of wherewithal, not enough time and resources. And that is the condition of the most motivated teachers everywhere. I do believe that here at Deer Hill School we are lucky to have some excellent resources (the Atlas curriculum unit design program, financial support from the CEF for time, training, and resources, both support and leadership from our Curriculum Director), even some early release days and full day PD sessions carved out, but it never seems enough.

Okay, so unit design may never be luxurious, but it does tap into the intelligent, intellectually creative side of teaching, and there is a lot to be said about that in one’s career. It is comforting to be able to plan out a day’s worth of instruction and know that the objectives, the activities, the assessments – everything – is “okay” and officially authorized by the teacher edition. If I do this every day, I know that I’m following the rules, no one can fault me, and I am covering the authorized curriculum. But those day’s become weeks, months and years, and I believe professionally it is necessary for us to grow (and experience the happiness that comes

with genuine professional growth) by exercising our intellectually creative side by designing units of instruction that do not take everything from the TE. The set of common core standards provides fertile ground for us to consider and reconsider what we do because of its emphasis on integration of knowledge and higher-order thinking skills.

So, exemplary educator performance in this indicator, first of all, would have to include either individual or partnered curriculum design using the district's Atlas program. (That addresses the criteria of "modeling" for others. It's not enough, under the exemplary rating anyway, to create a rigorous, standards based unit and then keep it to yourself.) I say individual or partnered because all too often in a large group, unless there are specific areas of individual accountability, some people do more work than others.¹ I would never assign an "exemplary" rating to a teacher if I really didn't know exactly what they had done that was exemplary.

Secondly, the insertion of the word "integrated" makes an important distinction between proficient and exemplary. When we stick to individual subject areas without attempts at integration, we are playing school old-style. In other words, rotating students through the subject areas, grade levels, from Kindergarten through 12th grade, with separate activities, assessments and objectives that never seem to connect or inform one another. This was once termed the "Carnegie Unit System" (yes, *that* Carnegie²) or, in layman's terms, the factory method. It was considered a necessary arrangement beginning in the early twentieth century because there were so many immigrant children flocking to the schools in the cities that they needed a systematic way to sort them out and keep them moving through the rotations. (It is interesting to note that John Dewey promoted his ideas of progressive education at *the exact same time*. His ideas entailed public education that integrated all areas of study so that students could experience learning in a more meaningful way. There was more to his philosophy, but that was the gist of it, and for a short time schools built around this philosophy thrived. But he didn't have the kind of money that Carnegie did, and so the one system prevailed.) We still use the Carnegie Unit System in high schools today.³

Here's a personal anecdote about the power of integration. (Forgive me if I've written about this before, but it remains a vivid moment for me in high school and I think it illustrates the power of subject area integration.) I was taking Algebra II and Chemistry at the same time in my Junior Year. Struggling through both, with Chemistry more so than Algebra II. For one

¹ Come on, you know I'm right. Most of you bothering to read this are probably the ones who wind up doing all the work.

² The American Industrialist Andrew Carnegie. One of the wealthiest men in the world in the early 20th century. Gave a huge amount of money to education and was therefore entitled to model public education on his ideas of the kinds of places schools ought to be – which were, because they had worked out so well for him, industrial factories. For fascinating reading, you may wish to read *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* by Callahan.

³ I'm wondering if there is a modern day billionaire who is right now trying to use wealth and power to influence public education?

brief moment in time the planets aligned *just so* and the two subject areas connected. In Algebra II we learned how to balance equations with several variables and in Chemistry ... we learned how to balance equations for the purpose of understanding chemical reactions. *It was the same thing only presented in two different contexts!* I got it and got a test grade of 80% in my chemistry class. My chemistry teacher stopped the class to shake my hand and the whole class applauded for me because I had never gotten anything near an 80% on my chemistry quizzes. Never before and, sad to say, never again.

Next up is the idea of “**accessible outcomes.**” Measurable is necessary but not sufficient to an exemplary unit design. To me, this means that inherent in the activity, materials, and instruction are those supports along the way that help all students arrive at those ideal outcomes. Many students need support along the way to synthesize the knowledge they do possess in order to come to conclusions requiring higher order thinking. This week I observed a class where the teacher wanted students to not just repeat factoids (even interesting ones) about the Aztec civilization, she encouraged them through carefully sequenced questioning to synthesize what they knew about Aztecs and other ancient civilizations to evaluate the most important aspects of this civilization, and then draw conclusions about what that meant for all ancient civilizations. Most students can’t easily get from the first point to the last. They need carefully worded questions or clues that lead them from one place to the next. An exemplary unit designer would include ideas for scaffolding or differentiating instruction in order to make that final higher order thought process accessible to all students.

Learn and **apply.** Exemplary curriculum units must contain within them an assessment that requires students to apply their new knowledge to a novel situation, preferably one that has established ideal *criteria* but does not hold up one singular exact replica *product* as the single best answer. There’s more than one way to protect an egg as it falls from the fire engine ladder.

In our Bill Daggett (ICLE) shorthand, that means rigorous unit design must be well represented by Quadrant C and Quadrant D instruction, which necessitates Quadrant C and Quadrant D assessment. Louise has been consistently open-minded about various ways to support teachers in this important work. So – let’s fire up that Atlas again...

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

-John Dewey